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The High Road

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Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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Abstract

... and then (the princess went on, writing to her sister in Paris) came the worst lurch of all, a horrible crunching noise, and a thump that threw me to my knees on the floor of the carriage, with both the girls on top of me.

Keywords

Mythril; Mythopoeic; Fiction; The High Road; Lawrence Waldron Cobb



The HIGH Road

...and then,

by Lawrence Waldron Cobb

(the princess went on, writing to her sister in Paris) came the worst lurch of all, a horrible crunching noise, and a thump that threw me to my knees on the floor of the carriage, with both the girls on top of me. Greta started to whimper, and I had to be quite firm with her. When we got ourselves sorted out, we found the whole coach was tilted over on its side--my side--as if the wheels on that side had fallen into a deep hole, as indeed they had. When we were quite sure that we had stopped, Mr. Nordlaw let go the hand strap and worked the door open on his side, the high side--almost like a trap door--and wriggled into the pouring rain. In two minutes he was back again.

"I'm afraid we shall be here for some time, Your Highness," he said. "The rear axle is broken. The driver has gone ahead on foot to look for help."

"Where are Lars and Georg?" I asked.

"Here," he said, "completely soaked through."

"Have them come inside," I said. "I will not be responsible for their dying of the phthisis."

They came in grinning and dripping. I made them take off their hats and waterlogged greatcoats and fold them on the floor under their feet.

"Where are we, Your Highness?" asked Laura.

"Somewhere between Basel and Paris," I said.

"Between Basel and Belfort, one might say," said Mr. Nordlaw, smiling.

"Not even as far as Belfort," said I, "and we ought to have been there in four hours easily. I wish some angel would pick us up and set us down at the castle gate in Stormhavn."

"So do I, Your Highness," said Laura. "This may be the grand tour, but to me it has been the miserable tour!"

I had to speak sharply again, for she does not appreciate her opportunities nor recognize that many girls at home would have given their dowry to change places with her--to have seen England, France, the Low Countries, Switzerland and Italy. What does a little discomfort on the return trip matter? Even if, at the moment, I felt almost inclined to agree with her, I did not say so.

While we were all struggling to keep ourselves upright on the sloping seat cushions, I happened to glance across at Georg, surprising an intent look on his face, but before I could speak, Mr. Nordlaw broke into my thoughts.

"Yes," he said. "Your Highness may have your desire fulfilled. Help seems to be on the way."

Sure enough, the patter of horses' hooves was plainly to be heard above the sound of the rain. Mr. Nordlaw worked his way out again, but a moment later put his head back in the door.

"Look to the rear, Highness," he said.

I knelt on the cushion and through the tiny back

window saw a coach drawn by four white horses drawing up behind us. As the rain seemed to be slackening, I could see the driver's face for an instant. There was a brightness about him in spite of the weather. When the coach came even with us, Georg opened the door for me, and Mr. Nordlaw handed me down to the ground--but not to the mud, for he had laid his greatcoat there to protect my shoes--and up into the new carriage. Inside, it was far superior to the one we had just left, for the cushions were more comfortable, the carpet softer, and the hangings more sumptuous. The girls followed while the footmen transferred our travelling trunks to the roof and lashed them down, then scrambled to their usual position on the back of the carriage. Mr. Nordlaw was still outside talking to the driver; then he put his head inside once more.

"With your permission, Your Highness," he said.

"The driver wants us all inside."

"Certainly," said I, "Georg and Lars are drenched. They must not ride in the open."

So they clambered down again and inside, after cleaning their boots as best they could. I made them stow all the water-soaked greatcoats in compartments under the seats so as to have the floor free. Then Mr. Nordlaw, with one foot on the step and his head inside, said to me with a quizzical smile, "Will you go direct to Stormhavn, Highness, or shall the driver set us down at Paris as you originally intended?"

Thinking surely he was in jest, I replied in kind, "Let us go directly home," never thinking that an idle word would deprive us of our long looked-for visit with you.

He spoke again to the driver in a language I did not recognize--though I do have some ability as a linguist, as you know so well--and swung himself inside. The rain had stopped by this time, although the clouds were still threatening to break and inundate us again at any moment, and the carriage started forward slowly, when suddenly there came the noise of hoofs again, this time at a gallop. Looking out the window I saw two horsemen brandishing muskets, dashing down the hill toward us, shouting something incomprehensible. They drew up beside the driver, who had brought us to a halt, both of them standing there, two extremely ill-favored men, pointing their snaphaunces threateningly at the driver, and this time I understood them well enough.

"Halte-la!" was what they had been shouting, and the spokesman followed it with voluminous threats in French as to what they would do if we did not alight immediately and submit to being robbed. I do not know what I expected our driver to do--perhaps to whip up his horses and dash furiously between them or run them down--but he merely clucked to the horses, and

the carriage rolled forward without a jerk. One of the horsemen was on my side, his knee about level with my face, but as we passed him, he seemed to shrink in size and I had to look down to see the top of his head. Looking up, he shouted again and fired, as did his companion, but evidently without effect, for none of us felt or heard anything but the discharge and the whistle of the ball flying by outside the window. The carriage moved steadily ahead into a gray fog in which we could no longer see the trees at the roadside, nor even the mud under our wheels.

The very sound of the horses' hoofs was muffled as if they had been padded. We were moving up a long, gentle incline, but there was no lurching or swaying as there had been before, and as there should have been, even had we been riding over cobblestones. There was no sound of the road at all except for that of wheels revolving on well-oiled hubs, springs gently squeaking, and the jingle of the horses' harness. I was just relaxing sufficiently to notice these things, though I had not yet begun to wonder about them, when Georg motioned to me, pointing out the window.

"Highness," he said agitatedly. "See outside. The gray fog has turned to white. What does it mean?"

"Don't point," I said. "It's unmannerly. Perhaps the fog is about to clear away and let us see where we are."

It had indeed lightened from drab gray to as white as milk, and was becoming brighter by the moment, taking on a golden sheen, until all at once we burst out into blinding sunlight.

"I see the sky!" Laura called abruptly, and looking back over my shoulder, I saw it too, as brilliantly blue as ever I have seen it, even at Nice. We seemed to be at the head of a mountain pass, having come up through a steep valley submerged in cloud, for there were clouds all around us, as fluffy white as meringue, and looking as good to eat, but banked up to awesome heights on both sides of us. We could not see ahead, but now I understood the pressure in my ears that reminded me of our journey over the Alps. Clearly we were at a great height somewhere, but where? Certainly not Belfort, for even I know enough of geography not to look for mountains there. What they so proudly term LeMont is only a little hill.

Lars Jensen was leaning dangerously out the window, but when I asked him what he was doing, he only said, "Now I see why the wheels aren't making any noise. We're riding over snow."

I looked out immediately, to see that the wheels indeed appeared to be rolling lightly over a white surface, on which their shadow and that of the coach streamed away darkly in the brilliant sunlight. The snowy surface below us seemed to fade into the cloudy ridges on both sides of us without a break. As I settled back in my seat, I became aware that, even though one could not see directly ahead, the blue sky was coming into view on either side, as the cloud banks became lower, and at last we came to the place where they dropped away entirely on both sides, exposing a magnificent view of the countryside as far as the eye could see, while we rode noiselessly along a snowy causeway which was comfortably wide and level.

Lars, still with his eyes on the whiteness under the wheels, suddenly whirled, pulling at my sleeve.

"What is the matter with you, Lars?" I asked impatiently.

"Don't you see it, Highness?" he shouted. "A

crevasse--a crevasse! Stop the coach! Driver, stop the coach!"

By the time I saw it, it was too late to stop; the coach had rolled across it without even a tremor. I had seen a dark rift in the snowy whiteness, but it did not look hardedged and definite as I had expected, but fleecy soft. Looking into it was like looking into a boiling pot. Before I could wonder at it, Lars was screaming again, "Stop the coach!" while the coach rolled steadily on. Then he shut his mouth as if choked. I looked out where he was looking, along with the others, but I could not get out a word. Ahead of us the white ground under our wheels was interrupted, not by a mere rift, but by a chasm wide enough to drop houses through. At first it seemed to have no bottom, or at least it was difficult to see deeply into it because of the filmy white wisps that drifted across it like smoke, but as the carriage moved closer, my eyes focused on something familiar yet topsy-turvy strange. There was a bottom, miles down there, and on it were tiny roads and trees and buildings--and we were falling into it! But no; as I dragged my eyes up, I saw the coach still level, passing over the chasm indeed, and gaining the safety of the other white bank. How we had done it, I had no idea, but safe for the moment, we all sighed with relief. Both girls began to chatter, and then Lars, who had never stopped watching our path, dropped back in his seat, groaned, and closed his eyes.

He had reason to despair. We had reached the end of the white causeway, and the driver, without pausing, had driven us over the edge of a precipice. Or so it seemed to the eye. Actually, there was no feeling of falling. We seemed to be going ahead on a level, the four horses drawing a carriage full of very frightened people along an invisible road in the sky. The magnificent view was all around us, and under us; nothing was bearing us up, and yet we were borne up and did not fall.

For my part, I sat there paralyzed, for my nerves gripped me like the jaws of a tiger, while the others sat silent as a picture. Then Greta, who sat across from me, gasped once, threw her arms around Lars and clung to him; Laura, next to me, leaned across and clung to Georg; and I . . . yes, I clung to Mr. Nordlaw. I do not know how long we went on like that waiting for the carriage to fall out of the sky and dash us to atoms, but presently Mr. Nordlaw gently disengaged one of my arms, saying, "Really, there is no danger at all, Your Highness."

He leaned over and tested the bolts on both the doors. "I advise you to keep the doors locked, but there is no danger as long as we all remain inside the carriage."

As if any of us would have leaned out! We were terrified even of looking out; at least I was. The wind whistling about us was rocking the carriage slightly from side to side, while we cringed with terror, and yet there came a time when the terror began to change insensibly to exhilaration, as I began to look out at the magnificent view which had not changed an iota.

"Oh!" I said, shuddering a bit. "To think of being up here in the sky with nothing beneath us, and the carriage rolling merrily on as if we were on the firmest of roadways."

"But we are on a roadway, Your Highness," said Mr. Nordlaw. "Look there, beneath the horses' hooves and on to the right."

"I am looking; there is nothing there--just nothing," I said, but then I began to see it, as faint and thin as smoke, like a sheer veil, a flat smooth something that stretched before the horses, curving

far ahead of us into the sky above the horizon. It was no impediment to the view, for through it I saw plainly mountains and forests and roadways, like fine white linen threads, far down on the surface of the earth.

"Where are we?" I murmured, thinking to myself how sharply I had meant to ask the same question not ten minutes earlier.

"Approaching the sunny land of France, Your Highness," said Mr. Nordlaw. "Off to our right you can see the mountains of the Vosges. We have passed over them, and below us is the valley of the Moselle. See, there, how the sun gleams on the water."

I saw indeed, but what I saw was a tiny silvery trickle curving toward us in a miniature green valley between forests that seemed like mossy banks. The smiling greensward below was laced with delicate lines and dots forming regular patterns.

"What are those?" I asked.

"They are vineyards," he said, and added, "Can you see farther ahead where a city is coming into view?"

"I see a whitish spot which looks as if sugar had been spilled," I said.

"That is Nancy," said he. "We are not yet over France, for this is Lorraine. And the river beyond the city is the Meuse."

The terror of height had not left me, and yet I was fascinated and bemused by the toy landscape which lay beneath us. We seemed to be fixed motionless in the sky, and yet the scene below moved on, like the hands of a clock, which never appear to move, yet when one looks at them they are never in the same position they occupied a few minutes before. It was the steadiness that calmed me, I think, if one could overlook the constant swaying of the coach on its springs, as the wind tugged at it, for there was no motion transmitted to us from the wheels, and still we moved steadily on. At one moment my heart stood still with horror at the thought of falling out of the sky; the next moment I considered myself walking like a giant across a world peopled with ants. And as time passed, the moments of dread came at longer and longer intervals and became less and less intense, until they were mere delicious thrills of fear punctuating a steadfast contemplation of the world so far beneath.

We continued on in a realm outside time and space. The river Aisne passed below and behind us, and the Serre, the Oise, and the Sambre. The town of Cambrai crept to our rear, followed by Douai and Bethune, and then ahead we caught sight of a wide streak of blue on the horizon, eating imperceptibly into the green land below our feet, until at last we were over Calais and out over the English Channel. And though the water seemed to go on to infinity, it was not five minutes before we saw a faint line of white at the limit of vision which resolved itself into the chalk cliffs of England. We had passed over France in perhaps twenty minutes, yet it had seemed forever.

The Thames estuary was now under our wheels, and presently the English countryside, with its rolling downs which gradually gave way to a checkerboard pattern of green fields enclosed in dark hedges. At times we could see a carriage on a country road, looking no bigger than a grain of sand on a thread. At last there was water under our feet again, the Mersey river with Liverpool to our right and Birkenhead directly below us, and then nothing but water as far as one could see. This time we were out of sight of land for at least ten minutes until a dark green

patch grew to a huge size under us, stretching off into invisibility on the right, but ending in an island and a welter of rocks to the left.

"The Isle of Man," said Mr. Nordlaw, "and that is Castletown below us."

Then water again, and again a green and dewy country, interspersed with lakes, northern Ireland, until we saw the last of it and seemed to float motionless in the sky with nothing but the vast blue sea below. Once we saw a ship scarcely moving in the immensity, and Mr. Nordlaw had to warn us not to crowd to one side of the carriage lest we overbalance it. The animated chatter of the girls and the footmen became still at last and we rested. There seemed to be a veil drawn across the sea to our left, shimmering like a dull mirror as the sun slid imperceptibly down his western track, a veil that he slipped behind, dimming his brightness, to my relief, and Laura's, for we faced him directly.

I did not know that I dozed, but suddenly I was wide awake, finding Laura tugging at my sleeve.

"Highness, look! Is it--can it be?"

I looked to see land ahead of us, a rugged shoreline with a white edge to the blue water, which threaded through a gap in the rocks to form a winding channel broadening at the far end into a harbor surrounded by high hills, and atop the highest hill a gray stone building crowned by a spire. It was familiar, yet for a moment I did not know what it was. Then it came to me in a rush of recognition. That winding channel and harbor I had seen on maps and mariner's charts; it was the harbor of Stormhavn, and the castle was Aegilshorst--home! We were much lower now, and the scene was slipping swiftly by beneath us, the ships in the harbor, the tile roofed houses of Stormhavn, the cobblestoned courtyard and the castle gate came flying toward us. All at once the carriage wheels rattled on the cobblestones and we came to a halt at the gate.

There was a crowd to witness our unexpected arrival--Mother and Father, so glad to see us back, and so many joyful greetings from everyone. Lars and Georg unloaded the trunks at once and carried them in. I did not think of the driver of the mysterious flying coach for some minutes, and when I sent Georg to bring him inside for refreshments, he was not to be found. Mr. Nordlaw only smiled at my consternation.

"He will not wait to be thanked, Your Highness," he said.

And that is why, dearest sister, I broke my promise to visit you on my return from the grand tour. Please forgive me and look for me next year.

Addresses

Send stories, poems, letters of comment and other material to Gary Myers, 6153 McKinley Ave., South Gate, CA 90280. Please include a stamped return envelope and a reply postcard if you desire a quick reply or acknowledgement of receipt. Gary will advise as to the dimensions and other specifications of artwork. Anything sent to him will be considered for his planned annual 'zine. (Please see the editorial on page 19 for details.)

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